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ABSTRACT

The single most important task facing elementary school teachers today is teaching students to read by the end of third grade. Learning to read in those formative years is essential to develop the higher order thinking skills demanded in the older grades, when students are reading to learn. Beginning readers must be engaged in highly purposeful and strategic techniques implemented by their teachers. First phonological awareness and knowledge of letters must be introduced. Activities centered around building an understanding of phonemes are essential to learning how to read an alphabetic language. With a systematic approach such as "Zoo-phonics," children learn the names and sounds of letters and are soon able to recognize and form their corresponding shapes. In kindergarten and first grade an integral part of any curriculum is reading aloud, which provides students with the opportunity to hear and see an enthusiastic teacher demonstrating good reading on a regular basis. Shared reading with a great deal of repetition is probably one of the most effective strategies for extending students' involvement in the literacy process and developing more proficient readers. Research indicates that reading can be taught most effectively with a balanced approach that incorporates the best of both phonics instruction and whole language. (Contains eight references.) (CR)

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Reading Strategies for Beginning and Proficient Readers

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Most Americans are passionate in the belief that reading is the most important skill for our children to learn in school. With the buzz words "a balanced approach to literacy" flying around the schools almost as frequently as recess bells, today's educators, administrators, parents, and politicians are engaged in an on-going and quite heated debate over the best methods for how to teach children to read and write. Whether one is a proponent of systematic, explicit phonics instruction and a bottom-up approach, which helps beginning readers understand that the words they speak and hear can be formulated by written symbols, or a firm believer in the top-down, whole language movement, which emphasizes the use of prior knowledge to make predictions in reading print, one must be aware that the debate exists because reading achievement in this country is alarmingly low. When more than 40 percent of fourth graders read at a "below basic" level, and with such illiteracy rates persisting in higher grades, our country must continue its search to identify and thus remediate this epidemic. There is a multitude of research which outlines and specifies techniques for teaching reading to children, a skill that is a gateway to all other knowledge, and thus creating a solid foundation on which to become proficient readers.

In 1994, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reported its Reading Assessment findings, which revealed more than four out of 10 fourth graders, approximately 42 percent, were reading below levels which were considered "basic" and exhibited little or no mastery of skills and knowledge necessary to perform work at that grade level (Collins, 1997). It is easy for parents and politicians to point their fingers in the direction of the instructors during the primary grades. Though their school districts may try to avoid classification as solely using phonics or whole language based approaches, supplies and methods in the schools do tend to lean more towards one camp

or the other. The single most important task facing elementary school teachers today is teaching students to read by the end of third grade (American Federation of Teachers, 1997). Learning to read is essential in these formative years in order to develop the higher-order thinking skills demanded in the older grades, when students are reading to learn. If students fall behind in reading skills, they most often never catch up, fall further behind in all areas of their academic instruction, and drop out higher rates. Right from the start, children should be surrounded with quality literature, be given the opportunity to write and explore with written symbols, and learn in a rich literate environment. However, this is often not enough and decoding skills associated with phonics instruction are found to be lacking in many beginning readers. Therefore, those students, along with the large percentage for whom reading comes easily over time, reap added benefits from instruction that combines building phonological awareness and whole language's meaningful and engaging curricula.

Beginning readers must be engaged in highly purposeful and strategic techniques implemented by their teachers. First, phonological awareness and knowledge of letters must be introduced. Activities centered around building an understanding of phonemes are essential to learning how to read an alphabetic language. With a systematic approach such as Zoo-phonics, children learn the names and sounds of letters and are soon able to recognize and form their corresponding shapes. They are then able to use recall and recognition strategies to comprehend the 44 phonemes, or smallest units of speech, of the English language. Regardless of the particular approach to phonics instruction, the learner's attention is focused on the sound/symbol relationship as a technique for learning to recognize words. Reading experts have found, however, that most students who are

non-readers by the end of third grade share a common problem; they have not developed the capacity to recognize these phonemes which are the basic building blocks of speaking and writing (IBID, 1997).

In Kindergarten and first grade, when students are truly developing their skills, there are several strategies to help them in their process of becoming readers. An integral part of any curriculum is reading aloud which provides students with the opportunity to hear and see an enthusiastic teacher demonstrating good reading on a regular basis. Many early readers will require greater teacher assistance and support; by using scaffolding, a research-based strategy, guidance and instruction by a teacher or knowledgeable peer helps a student function on a higher level (Gunning, 1996). Calling attention to high frequency words is another aide used by teachers for reading instruction, as it allows students to repeatedly hear, see, and even write words that they will use often. Discussing rhymes, ending sounds, and word patterns can also be useful for young children who may be developmentally able to comprehend these concepts and then store them into memory.

Shared reading with a great deal of repetition is probably one of the most effective strategies for extending student's involvement in the literacy process and developing more proficient readers. Through big books (often with large print as well as enticing illustrations) and predictable books, emergent and more experienced readers are allowed to rely on context to guess an upcoming word rather than use the word's spelling (Collins, 1997). This facet of whole language encourages risk taking and provides opportunities for experimentation with language's different rules. Teachers do not correct errors made during these predictive exercises, as breaking up the reading process is unfavorable and possibly detrimental according to whole language advocates.

As is seen in classrooms that have students who enjoy reading, proficient readers exhibit characteristics that illustrate their continuing mastery of reading. Their attitudes are clearly more positive and favorable toward reading than that of their peers, for whom reading is either a constant struggle or an area of instruction with little or no foundation. Proficient readers execute strategies like organizing ideas and sequencing the events in stories and also visualizing parts to further enhance their comprehension. The acquisition of vocabulary is increasingly more rapid and varied as they read lengthier and more complicated sentences in books. With greater speed and accuracy, proficient readers find thematic stories more interesting. This stage may be marked by reading both fiction and nonfiction, humorous tales, and even easy chapter books (Gunning, 1996). Errors are often self-corrected as students more readily realize their mistakes.

Leading research indicates that reading can be taught most effectively with a balanced approach that incorporates the best of both phonics instruction and whole language. Embraced in moderation, methods for reading instruction vary from teacher to teacher and school to school, but have the same common goal; we want to create a nation of children who not only know how to read, but love it and practice it without anxiety or hesitation. The transition from a that of a beginning reader to a proficient reader is facilitated with support systems such as regular parental involvement, safe environments in which to explore literature without the fear of being corrected, and solid instruction by educators who, without fail, encourage reading at all levels. As was previously mentioned, reading is the most vital skill and serves as the gateway to learning. Our nation is in the midst of educating students who, without the acquisition of adequate literacy skills, will be unable to function successfully unless we whole-heartedly act to change this

reality. A major effort to enhance reading skills is underway so that today's children succeed. Hopefully by teaching phonics and using methods of whole language instruction together in all primary classrooms, students will not only learn to read more rapidly than in the past, but develop an interest and passion for reading to last a life time.

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